

# **Learning Disabilities and e-Information**

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# **Learning Disabilities and e-Information: Navigating the Electronic Hypermaze**

**BY**

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*A minha querida Eliana, quem, quando eu menos esperava ...*

*Chegou com três alegrias:*

*A da vida*

*A da bondade*

*E a do amor*

*Por isso tem meus eternos agradecimentos*

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## About the Author

Pete is an Honorary Senior Research Fellow based in the Department of Information Studies at University College London. He has spent the last 23 years investigating the role and impact of digital technology – and in particular the Internet – in the health service, the media and education. The majority of this work has explored the use of technology by people with learning disabilities. His PhD looked at optimising Website design for this cohort, and he has just completed a three-year Post-doctoral Fellowship from the British Academy, entitled ‘The Digital Lives of People with Learning Disabilities’, which extended his work into the mobile environment. Pete has published widely, being author or co-author of three books and over 120 journal articles and book chapters.

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# Prologue

“Hello!” He boomed.

I was in the Day Centre reception area, waiting to see a member of staff about my learning disabilities research.

“Hello!” He repeated, “I’m Malcolm!”.

His wide, toothy grin made me smile. He was about 50 I suppose, thin-faced and with a slight stubble. He was with a lady of about the same age, next to whom was a white cane. Her mega-thick lensed glasses suggested she was its owner.

“Hi.” My smile couldn’t compete with his, but I made it as bright as I could, “I’m Pete.”

He gestured to his companion, still grinning broadly. “We’re friends!”

She smiled and nodded in agreement.

“That’s great. It’s good to have friends!” I replied, inwardly chiding myself for being so patronising.

They turned back to each other, laughing and chatting. Suddenly, Malcolm declared “I’m going to take your cane!” He grabbed it, held it in his hand and twirled it around mischievously. She chuckled.

“Hope you’re going to give it back!” I offered, jokingly – but sensing again the awkwardness of my attempt at banter.

As they laughed Malcolm’s support worker arrived to drive him home. This was needed, as I discovered later, because he found public transport confusing and crossed roads without due care, being immersed in thought.

As he rose to leave, he placed the cane carefully back in his friend’s hand, making sure she held it securely. So gentle were his actions, and with such a tender “here you are”, that if you believe wisdom is simply the manifestation of kindness and empathy, then for a few short minutes I had been in the presence of the wisest person on Earth.

\*\*\*

The above account, of course, is a true story. Everything about the exchange reminded me of the type of story related in the Brazilian literary genre of the ‘crônica’. These are very short stories, often with a twist at the end, funny or sad, and usually very touching. Masters of the art are Rubem Braga, Fernando Sabino and Machado de Assis. My modest effort is both a homage to the literature and – more importantly – to the amazing people, like Malcolm and his friend, I met in the course of the work documented here, who gave their time freely to me and to the research. I am profoundly grateful.

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